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SUBJECT Briefing on Downing of Korean Flight 007

NINA TOTENBERG: On August 31st, 1983, Korean Air Lines Flight 007 took off from Anchorage, Alaska on the last leg of its flight from New York to Seoul, South Korea. About 4 1/2 hours later, after straying into Soviet airspace, the Boeing 747 was shot down over Sakhalin Island by Soviet fighters. Two hundred and forty passengers and 28 crew members were killed.

Over the last year, questions have been raised about what exactly happened that night. Today, in an effort to answer those questions, the State Department held a briefing. It's view of the incident remains the same. The KAL jet was not a spy plane. And for the State Department, the real question is why the Soviets responded the way they did.

Catherine Ferguson reports.

CATHERINE FERGUSON: Yesterday the Soviet Union, in official press dispatches, once again charget that the Korean airliner was on a U.S. spy mission. And the blame for what happened, according to the Soviets, rests at the White House door.

The Administration's view is quite the opposite. A senior official briefing reporters today on the grounds that he not be identified said the exact reasons for the airliner's straying into Soviet territory may never be known. But he personally believes that the Soviets did think that Korean plane was on a spy mission, and that, he said, is why they shot it down.

The Soviets have consistently used the incident for propaganda purposes. But the State Department official reminded

his audience today that the Soviets were condemned worldwide for the incident. And the International Aviation Council, issuing its condemnation of the Soviet Union last spring, found that the USSR did not take sufficient steps, following international guidelines, to properly identify the civilian airliner.

The same official said the case is essentially closed, from the U.S. perspective, unless new evidenc is made available. But the U.S. and the Soviets agree that the record is not complete on what happened a year ago. And in this country, many outside the government have called for a congressional inquiry into the matter.

David Pearson is one. A Ph.D. candidate, Yale University, Pearson is the author of a recent article on KAL Flight 007 in The Nation magazine.

DAVID PEARSON: Mr. Shultz, subsequent to the downing of Flight 007, said that the United States had not been informed of the incident until seven to eight hours after it had occurred. And I said this simply doesn't seem to be a credible explanation, given the enormous wealth of intelligence and military assets that I know exist in the Far East.

FERGUSON: Pearson is just one of many to study the complicated and often murky events of last August 31st. His thesis, put briefly, given the extent of U.S. sophisticated surveillance systems operating in the Far East, either there was a conscious decision, to which U.S. authorities were a party, to allow Flight 007 to deviate off course, or, says Pearson, there was an unprecedented communications failure by the U.S. intelligence-gathering agencies, which maintain extensive land, air and sea listening posts.

PEARSON: When Flight 007 first entered Soviet territory over the Kamchatka Peninsular, it was already about 300 miles off course -- that is, a radar blip in a strikingly unusual location. This certainly would have been identified by these stations. And as the flight of 007 progressed toward Sakhalin Island, certainly other stations would have picked up its flight course, as well.

FERGUSON: On that point, that the U.S. radar should certainly have picked up the Korean airliner relatively early into its flight deviation, the senior U.S. official today was quite specific. No U.S. agency was aware that the KAL flight was off course until word had come that the airliner was in the water. The official also said that no U.S. Government agency ever knew the plane was in difficulty. And because of that, he said, the U.S. could not issue a warning.

James Bamford is author of The Puzzle Palace, a book

on the supersecret National Security Agency. It is one of several U.S. Government agencies involved in electronic surveillance in the Far East. Bamford, who has also written about the KAL incident, points to the presence that day of a highly sophisticated U.S. reconnaissance plane, an RC-135, whose job it is to collect intelligence data. Bamford and others speculate that the U.S. intelligence-gathering apparatus would have been in a state of high alert last August 31st, knowing that the Soviets had scheduled a missile test in the region.

BAMFORD: Based on everything that I've learned about the NSA and interviews I've done with people that have worked for the agency in that area, it would seem almost impossible that they would not have picked that up as it was happening, because at the time we had an aircrft up there that was only 75 miles away from the Korean airliner at one point. And that aircraft is packed with nothing but high-technology eavesdropping equipment. And for it to miss this entire incident seems almost impossible.

FERGUSON: Bamford agrees with U.S. officials that the Korean airliner was not on a spy mission of any sort. He says the U.S. has discontinued a past practice of sending in a plane in order to put the Soviets on high alert.

But, says Bamford, even without intending to send the Soviets into high gear, the net result for the U.S. would be the same, an intelligence bonanza.

BAMFORD: That is why we have all our intelligence resources in that area, to capture this kind of information. And the theory that all that hardware and resource that we have in that area was turned off that night is somewhat absurd to me.

FERGUSON: We asked today about the U.S. reaping an intelligence bonanza as a result of the KAL flight into Soviet territory. The senior U.S. official said, and I quote, that sounds like hogwash to me.